

MISSION UNDER LOCKDOWN: CHURCH ARMY MISSION COMMUNITY AND STAFF DURING COVID-19

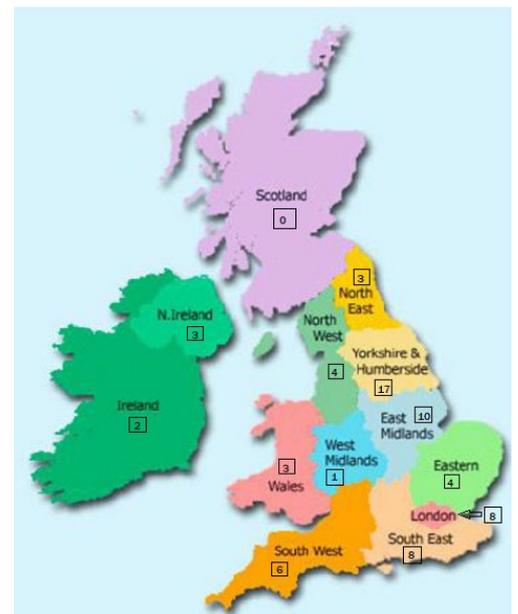
Church Army's Research Unit, June 2020

At the start of May 2020, members of the Church Army family were invited to take part in a brief survey that aimed to gather their thoughts and experiences of ministry during lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This online survey was promoted through Connected, the Church Army internal news email, and was open to all staff, evangelists (both active and retired), those in Centres of Mission, and Mission Community members who considered themselves to be involved in ministry of some form.

This report summaries the findings and responses of this survey.

Who responded?

- 75 responses.
- One-third of respondents are retired and two-thirds are active.
- 70% of respondents are Commissioned Church Army evangelists.
- Just under a quarter (23%) of respondents are ordained.
- Just under 5% of respondents are on furlough.
- Responses were received from all regions apart from Scotland (see map for regional breakdown).



Health

While this is a sensitive subject, we wanted to get a sense of the respondents' health and whether they were needing to take precautions under the government's guidance.

- Just under half of the respondents (46%) said that they hadn't been self-isolating or shielding.
- Nearly two-fifths of respondents (38%) had been self-isolating or shielding due to a pre-existing health condition or vulnerability of themselves or a member of their household (this includes being over the age of 70) – the majority of those who are retired gave this response.
- Just over one in ten of the respondents (11%) had self-isolated due to displaying coronavirus symptoms.
- No respondents had self-isolated due to being in contact with someone with coronavirus symptoms.

Ministry

Respondents were asked to think about their ministry as it looked before the lockdown began and then consider which aspects had changed and which had remained the same.

Changes in ministry

- The most commonly reported change in ministry was, understandably, the stopping of physical gatherings.
- But just as common was respondents reporting an increase in their relational work – spending more time and putting more effort into keeping in touch with people (over the phone, texting, social media etc).
“Ministry has become much more relational as there is less of a focus on Sundays.”
- Many respondents mentioned livestreaming or recording their services and using platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp to move regular groups online.
- Several have seen their ministry have a much greater focus on people’s practical needs e.g. food banks.
- Several also spoke of their increase of use of social media.
“[I’m] creating a daily vlog for the school community including silly moments, advice, shout-outs and a daily reflection.”
- 4 respondents said that their workload had increased since the crisis began and 2 said that nothing about their ministry had changed.

Remaining the same

- The most common response was the continuation of pastoral care and support of people, but finding different ways to do this.
“[I am] keeping in touch with people who have recently completed an Alpha course and discipling them - but now over the telephone.”
- The second most common response was prayer! In fact, several respondents spoke of the value they found in joining the Church Army midday prayers on Zoom.
“Our rhythm of prayer has been really established [during this time].”
- Many respondents also said that they are still preparing for and leading services, even if they are taking place online.
- Several of the ordained respondents mentioned that their funeral ministry felt like the only thing that has remained the same, although even this is now more challenging.
“Funerals and the immense trauma of grief being added to [the bereaved] by the reduced numbers of those allowed to attend and making decisions not expected as to who can come. The sense of inhumanity because of this.”

New needs in community

- The most commonly reported need in communities is around people experiencing loneliness and isolation.
“More neighbours have stopped to talk over my front garden wall and talked about some deep issues. They never have done before.”
- Many also spoke of an increase in mental health needs – depression, anxiety and fear.
“People are in need of finding peace and comfort in these strange new times.”

- Several mentioned the needs for practical help – such as food and medicine deliveries, growing family tensions, coping with children being at home all the time and financial worries.
“More families [are] struggling; children are running around and getting very little support.”
“Those with energetic children are feeling overwhelmed.”
- A few respondents noted that the crisis has highlighted areas of the community that lack the access and/or skills to use technology. And as so many resources and services are being provided online currently, these people are being left out.

Partnering with groups/organisations

- Around a quarter of the respondents said that they were currently working with food banks in their community.
- And another quarter are partnering with other Christian denominations to support their communities.
- 20% are involved with community mutual aid groups.
- And just under 20% are involved in food distribution services such as delivering school lunches.
- Very few respondents (only 2) reported partnering with the NHS Volunteer Responder scheme – this is similar to the picture seen nationally as there has been much less uptake of this service than was anticipated.

Wider thoughts and comments

Encouragements

When the respondents were asked to describe encouragements they have found during the current period, several common themes seem to be present:

- **Community:** an increase in the sense of community and of people uniting to support each other. Some also spoke of their hope that this new sense of community spirit and helping neighbours wouldn't be just limited to this time of crisis but will continue in the years to come.
“The feeling of coming together, unity and working in harmony for a common goal has been wonderful.”
- **Technology:** the blessing of technology and how it is enabling them to maintain connections with friends, family, and also the people they work with in their community. They also spoke of how it is lessening, to some extent, the isolation people are feeling.
“Some members of [the] congregation [are] inviting their Facebook friends to join in worship activity, where they would not have had the confidence to do so previously.”
- **Engagement:** opportunities the current situation is providing to engage with people they wouldn't have been able to otherwise - whether that is through enquirers attending online church services or simply chatting to people while on daily walks as people look for connection and community at this time.
“We are reaching people far beyond our geographical parish as a new online community is tuning in and watching.”
“[I have] spoken with neighbours whom I have been trying to for a few years.”

- Hope: Several evangelists also spoke of the fact that during this time, where many people are feeling uncertainty, as Christians, we have the overriding message of hope that we are able to deliver to these people.

“We, as Christians have this great message of hope in Christ ... and it is at dark times like these that he is more than enough.”

Questions and challenges

Throughout the survey, a number of respondents said that while they have been learning and adapting to all of the changes that have come with the UK restrictions, they have also begun thinking about what the future may look like post-COVID-19.

- Respondents spoke of not wanting to simply return to ‘everything as it was’, but to be able to take forward positive changes.

“How do we ensure we continue to embrace the opportunities of new media when church buildings re-open? It will be so easy to slip back into the known and comfortable, especially as so many of our congregations are longing for precisely that.”
- There was also the reminder that, those around us in our communities, but also in the wider nation, may look at what the church did (or didn’t) do and see it as a reflection on Jesus.

“What will our not-yet-Christian neighbours think of us when all this is over?”
- Some spoke of enjoying their change in work environment.

“I hope Church Army consider home working for staff as a possibility after this is over.”

Appreciation for Church Army

Many respondents expressed their thanks and appreciation to the Church Army team in Sheffield and also the wider Church Army family.

“Thank you to CA and all our colleagues for their support and prayers at this time.”
“I feel that CA HR dept are proactively looking after staff.”

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